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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 002061

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: RALLIES AND RHETORIC AS ARMENIA RAMPS-UP FOR THE REFERENDUM

REF: YEREVAN 1692

Classified By: DCM A.F.Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) The November 27 referendum on proposed constitutional amendments continues to dominate local news as political forces make their last-ditch efforts to garner popular support. Opposition leaders have announced a series of rallies on November 24-27 to protest what they are already calling a rigged election and encourage their followers to boycott. For their part, pro-government forces have announced rallies (one of which coincides with a major opposition rally) aimed at getting out the "yes" vote on November 27. A large percentage of opposition parties announced November 23 that they would pull their representatives from Local Election Commission duties in individual polling places to comply with their "total boycott" of the elections. A long list of local NGOs is preparing for election observation on November 27 but international observers will still be limited to a handful of Council of Europe Parliamentarians scheduled to arrive in Yerevan on November 25. The GOAM's decision not to invite a full team of international observers will limit our ability to comment on the fairness of the referendum. Beyond possible irregularities, the biggest obstacles to the constitutional amendments may be the GOAM's uncertain ability to attract more than 755,000 voters to the polls on November 27. End Summary.

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RALLIES GALORE -- BUT HOW BIG?  
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2. (C) The November 27 referendum on proposed constitutional amendments continues to dominate political news and discussion in Armenia. Political forces on both sides are making their last-ditch efforts to garner popular support through media campaigns and public meetings. Opposition leaders have completed their automobile caravan tour of Armenia's regions and have announced a series of rallies on November 24-27. The vast majority of the major opposition parties are still calling for supporters nationwide to boycott the elections on November 27 and instead join in Yerevan to protest what they are already calling a rigged election. Former Armenian FM, potential presidential contender and Heritage Party leader (former Amcit) Raffi Hovannissian will host a rally on November 25 together with Republic Party Aram Sargsyan. Pro-government "Yes" rallies will take place on November 24 and 25 around Yerevan and will include a line-up of well-known singers and entertainers. Not surprisingly, the Yerevan mayor's office has approved all of these rallies including one which conflicts with the Heritage Party rally. Comment: The rallies will be a useful indicator of how many people are willing to take to the streets in advance of the referendum since there has not been a large multi-party opposition rally in Yerevan for more than a year. Overtly pro-government rallies are a rarity in Armenia; we will be watching the "Yes" concert/rallies with interest. End comment.

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BOYCOTTING THE VOTE AND ELECTORAL COMMISSIONS  
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3. (SBU) The opposition Justice Bloc and National Unity Faction (who together control the majority of opposition forces in Armenia) announced November 22 that they would pull their representatives from electoral commissions at the local, regional and national level. Opposition leaders said the move was a way to comply with their "total" boycott of the referendum. When asked to justify this decision, opposition leader Stepan Demirchian said the opposition was "outnumbered anyway" and refused to "validate another falsified election." Other opposition parties that have taken a different approach, however, to the referendum. The National Democratic Alliance (a small party led by Arshak Sadoyan) has not recalled its representatives from electoral

commissions and is giving its supporters a choice on how they will vote against the referendum. Prominent opposition figure Shavarsh Kocharyan has also steered clear of the call to boycott the referendum and his party is keeping a low profile in advance of the November 27 vote.

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LOCAL OBSERVERS GOING IT (ALMOST) ALONE  
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14. (C) A long list of local NGOs is preparing to observe voting on November 27; their members will serve as the only nationwide monitors for the referendum. The Central Election Commission (CEC) earlier this week approved 24 NGOs as election observers. Ten political parties will be observing the balloting, including seven opposition parties. The local director of the USAID-funded "It's Your Choice" NGO told us that his organization was dispatching 3,000 observers to 1,300 polling places nationwide. During a luncheon hosted by the DCM to discuss the referendum, the newly arrived Chief of Party of the International Federation for Electoral Systems Chedomir Flego mentioned that he would be observing the balloting together with an un-affiliated NGO for voters with disabilities as well as a CEC escort.

15. (C) International election observers will be limited to a group of 14 Council of Europe parliamentarians who will arrive in Yerevan on November 24. Special Representative of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe Bojana Urumova told us November 23 that the group will visit a limited number of polling places on election day in and around Yerevan and would hold a press conference to announce its findings on November 28. Post has offered its assistance in briefing the delegation and helping its members prepare for their observation duties.

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COMMENT: STILL A QUESTION OF NUMBERS  
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16. (C) Beyond concerns about possible voter irregularities, government pressure, opposition posturing and polling procedures, the big question in the run-up to this weekend's election is whether or not enough Armenians will go to the polls on November 27. According to preliminary data from the CEC, 755,468 "yes" votes are needed to overcome the threshold for passage of the referendum (Armenia's constitution stipulates that a referendum will pass if it receives more than fifty percent of the votes, which must not be less than one third of the 2,266,404 registered voters). This is a tall order, even if unconfirmed rumors about quotas and considerable GOAM pressure on local leaders are true. The GOAM's decision not to invite a full team of international observers will limit our ability to make conclusions about the fairness of the referendum. We expect local NGO monitoring groups will serve as our best source for first-hand information on the November 27 referendum.  
EVANS